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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine how well-balanced and accurately the largest ethnic minority groups are portrayed in major contemporary basal reader series. The amount of ethnic minority content by group and by basal series was investigated, as were the qualitative aspects of that content: the locale of the story, the socioeconomic class represented, the identities of the characters, the time period in which the story took place, and the life situation depicted. Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans were selected for study because they represent the three largest ethnic minorities nationwide. A multiethnic category was included to cover the many stories in basal readers that feature characters from more than one ethnic group. The components for grades one through six of nine major basal reader series published between 1979 and 1981 were chosen for examination, and 3,389 stories were reviewed. Results showed that the total percentage of content devoted to ethnic minority groups among the basal reader series was parallel with an industry-wide figure of about 18%. Qualitatively, the results indicated that the readers present a rather unrealistic picture of ethnic minority groups and race relations. However, basal readers in general have improved a great deal over the years in their treatment of ethnic minority groups. (DF)

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The Treatment of Minorities in Nine Recently Published Basal Series

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Paper presented at the AERA Annual Meeting
San Francisco, April 1986

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The Treatment of Minorities in Nine Recently Published Basal Series

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Although there is general acceptance that major publishers of basal reader series have made progress in enhancing the quantity and quality of their treatment of ethnic minority groups in story characters and content, current research studies on the extent of such attempts are limited. Such studies have often addressed only one ethnic group or focused only on one or a few grade levels in basal reader series. The findings of these studies suggest that the treatment of ethnic groups is still uneven and stereotypic. Roderick (1970), who reviewed studies on textbook evaluations published between 1963 and 1969, determined that Black Americans were treated more extensively than other minority groups, but the portrayal of the group was unrealistic. Ortega (1974), who reviewed textbooks adopted by the state of California between 1969 and 1973, found improvement in the depiction of Mexican Americans, but noted that stereotypes, omissions, and distortions were still present. Kyle (1978) reviewed the story content in the sixth grade basals of nine major publishers from the mid-1970's and determined that ethnic minority representation was usually in the form of famous historical or contemporary figures rather than fictional characters involved in realistic, modern situations. Garcia and Osborn (1981) examined over 2500 selections in basal reader series published between 1977 and 1980 and found the portrayal of ethnic minorities to be distorted and not reflective of the groups' actual accomplishments.

Purpose and Method

The purpose of this study was to determine how well balanced and accurately the largest ethnic minority groups are portrayed in major contemporary basal reader series. Both quantitative and qualitative aspects of this portrayal were addressed. The amount of ethnic minority content by group and by basal series was investigated, as were the qualitative aspects of that content: the locale of the story, the socioeconomic class represented, the identities of the characters, the time period in which the story took place, and the life situation depicted.

Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans were selected for study since they represent the three largest ethnic minorities nationwide. A fourth category, Multiethnic, was included to cover the many stories in basal readers that feature characters from more than one ethnic group. The grades 1-6 components of nine major basal reader series published between 1979 and 1981 were selected for investigation, and a total of 3389 stories were reviewed. Publisher's guidelines for the depiction of minorities were used as a starting place for determining the qualitative categories (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981; MacMillan Publishing Co., 1975; Scott, Foresman & Co., 1974). These guidelines generally stress that ethnic minorities should be depicted in a variety of communities, jobs, and life roles, with respect paid to their heritages, unique experiences, and modern problems. Experience in the area of ethnic content in texts was also employed to determine the final data categories and subcategories. For story locale, five subcategories were identified: urban, suburban, rural, unknown, or not applicable. For socioeconomic class, five subcategories were identified: upper class, middle class, lower class, unknown, or not applicable. For character identity, nine subcategories were identified: adult male, adult female, nuclear family member, extended family member, boy, girl, young child, adolescent, or other.

For time period, four subcategories were identified: historical, contemporary, future, or unknown. For life situation, four subcategories were identified: minority problem, non-minority problem, descriptional, and other.

Data Analysis

The quantitative aspects of the data for ethnic minority groups by each of the nine basal reader series, with totals, is given in Table I. Rounded percentage of content devoted to each of the three targeted ethnic minority groups and the multiethnic category was quite consistent across publishers. With the exception of one basal series (Addison-Wesley) the total percentage of content specifically devoted to Blacks, Hispanics, or Native Americans ranged between nine and fourteen percent. Blacks were represented more than the other groups with one exception (Open Court) where Blacks received equal representation with Native Americans. Native Americans were represented more than Hispanics with only two exceptions (Holt, Rinehart & Winston and Scott, Foresman) where these two groups received equal representation. There was also a distinct within-groups consistency, with variances between publishers seldom more than two percent. Somewhat more variation was seen in the multiethnic category, where content variation ranged up to six percent. Basal series which devoted less content to specific ethnic categories tended to compensate by having a larger number of multiethnic selections. This seemed particularly true for the Addison-Wesley series, which was below the average in each specific ethnic category, but well above the average in the multiethnic category. This compensation tendency can also be seen in the MacMillan series, which was above the average in each specific ethnic category, but well below the average in the multiethnic category. The resulting total ethnic content for any

basal series deviates only slightly from the total mean.

The qualitative aspects of the data are summarized for all nine basal readers in rounded percentages in Table II. In the locale category, Blacks and Hispanics were found in urban inner city areas far more than Native Americans, who tended to be located in rural settings. None of the groups were depicted in suburban areas very often and Native Americans not at all. Location was not specified in many of the stories reviewed. In the social class category, over thirty percent of the stories and poems for Blacks and Hispanics and over eighty percent of the Native American selections were similarly indexed as unknown or not applicable. Over forty percent of the Black and Hispanic stories portrayed the groups in middle class settings, while only sixteen percent of the stories and poems concerning Blacks, eight percent of the stories concerning Hispanics, and five percent of the stories concerning Native Americans depicted the groups in lower class settings. Character identity was generally better distributed among subcategories for the three groups. Much of the Native American content was in the form of poems or passages which dealtwith Indian beliefs but not with specific characters.

Less variety was seen in the time period and life situation categories. Almost forty percent of the Native American content was historical (mostly pre-Columbian) while only seven percent of the Hispanic content and sixteen percent of the Black content was historical. Ninety percent of the Hispanic content and almost eighty percent of the Black content was categorized as contemporary. Little or no content dealing with these groups in futuristic settings was in evidence. In the life situation category, the majority of stories for all groups contained either descriptive content which did not address a problem, or content dealing with the solutions to non-minority problems with no racial overtones. Almost no content dealt with particular

minority problems such as prejudice, housing and job discrimination, or racial slurs. Much of the content for Native Americans was categorized as other, and dealt with Indian religions and values.

Results and Discussion

The results of this investigation support the conclusions that basal readers include a somewhat standardized amount of content devoted to ethnic minority groups, and that the overall treatment of these groups remains somewhat uneven.

The total percentage of content devoted to ethnic minority groups among the major basal reader series is substantially parallel, with only minor deviations from what seems to be an industry-wide figure of about eighteen percent. Of the four ethnic categories examined, practically all nine basal series included a greater number of stories about Blacks and multiethnic groups than stories about Native Americans or Hispanics. In like manner, practically all series included a greater number of stories about Native Americans than about Hispanics. Within-groups consistency among publishers was also marked. Hence, both the total percentage of ethnic minority content and the content devoted to any particular group was presented in formula-like fashion across basal publishers. This situation is very similar to research findings regarding the similarity of basal readers on reading instruction variables reported by Sadoski (this volume).

Qualitatively, these basal readers present a somewhat unrealistic picture of ethnic minority groups and race relations. Hispanics appear to be underrepresented, particularly in light of projections that by the turn of the century the Hispanic population will surpass the Black population as the largest minority group. The great majority of Hispanics found in basal readers are Mexican Americans/Chicanos, while Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans and other Spanish surnamed groups are virtually overlooked.

Many of the stories concerning Blacks depict this group in middle class settings and involve finding solutions to non-minority problems, or are descriptive selections not involving problems. As depicted here, the Black experience is more ideal than real, and the problems of discrimination that many Blacks face daily are not in evidence. Of the 195 stories depicting Blacks in the nine basal series examined only one story was classified as focusing on minority problems.

The portrayal of Native Americans is perhaps the most uneven. Much content presents this group as a pre-Columbian phenomenon, and few selections depict the group on reservations, living in cities, or assimilating into American life. The Native American selections which deal with characters at all are generally historical accounts of the Thanksgiving festivities or of famous figures such as Pocahontas.

Several considerations should be observed regarding these conclusions. One is that basal readers have generally come a long way over the years in their treatment of ethnic minority groups. Second, basal readers serve primarily as programs for reading instruction and some questions exist as to their responsibility for a completely accurate portrayal of a society. Many other considerations, such as children's preferences, receive heavy emphasis in the selection of basal reader content. However, it seems reasonable that attention should be given to providing children with an accurate perception of the plurality of the American experience; some research indicates that such a provision promotes favorable attitudes toward ethnic groups and increased reading motivation (Campbell and Wirtenberg, 1980). Third, the production of basal reader series is a big business. Marketing constraints compel publishers to select content that is generally noncontroversial and offensive to as few as possible. Given the existing political climate, this is no mean task. Finally, the qualitative aspects included in this in-

vestigation do not exhaust the possibilities for appropriate group representation. For example, while the Open Court series includes the lowest total amount of ethnic content, its quality could be the most appropriate. While the findings presented here may serve as a guide in evaluating the ethnicity of basal reader content, educators should pay specific attention to individual programs before arriving at final judgements.

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Table I

PERCENTAGE TABLE OF ETHNIC CONTENT IN NINE BASAL READER SERIES

Publisher/Series/Date/ No. of Stories	Black	Native American	Hispanic	Multiethnic	Total
1. Open Court, "The Headway Program, " 1979, N = 528	4.0	4.0	1.0	5.0	14.0
2. Rand McNally, "Young American Basic Series," 1979, N = 347	6.0	4.0	2.0	5.0	17.0
3. Ginn and Company, "Reading 720: Rainbow Edition," 1980, N = 404	4.0	4.0	1.0	9.0	18.0
4. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, "Holt Basic Reading," 1980, N = 409	5.0	2.0	2.0	9.0	18.0
5. Laidlaw, "The Laidlaw Reading Program," 1980, N = 269	6.0	4.0	2.0	9.0	21.0
6. Macmillan, "Series r Macmillan Reading," 1980, N = 427	6.0	5.0	3.0	4.0	18.0
7. Houghton Mifflin, "Houghton Mifflin Reading Program," 1981, N = 391	6.0	4.0	3.0	5.0	18.0
8. Scott, Foresman, "Scott, Foresman Reading," 1981, N = 456	6.0	2.0	2.0	10.0	20.0
9. Addison-Wesley, "Addison-Wesley Reading Program," 1982, N = 608	4.0	2.0	1.0	12.0	19.0
Total Stories = 3839	$\bar{x}$=5.2	$\bar{x}$=3.4	$\bar{x}$=1.8	$\bar{x}$=7.6	$\bar{x}$=18.1

Table II

PERCENTAGE TABLE OF QUALITATIVE ASPECTS OF ETHNIC CONTENT IN NINE BASAL READER SERIES

Category	Blacks (N=195)	Native Americans (N=128)	Hispanics (N=60)
Story Locale			
Urban	27	5	32
Suburban	7	0	5
Rural	17	67	32
Unknown	37	7	25
Not Applicable	12	20	7
Socioeconomic Class			
Upper Class	6	2	7
Middle Class	44	10	43
Lower Class	16	5	8
Unknown	27	46	33
Not Applicable	7	36	8
Character Identity			
Adult Male	11	4	8
Adult Female	10	9	2
Nuclear Family Member	8	3	13
Extended Family Member	5	5	15
Boy	22	12	5
Girl	13	13	20
Young Child	7	2	8
Adolescent	4	2	3
Other	20	50	25
Time Period			
Historical	16	39	7
Contemporary	79	40	90
Future	1	1	0
Unknown	4	20	3
Life Situation			
Minority Problem	1	3	2
Non-minority Problem	36	26	43
Descriptive	37	29	33
Other	26	42	22